



Sunday, March 21, 2021

Rev. Robert W. Brown

GRATITUDE; Living into the Resurrected Life

INTRODUCTION

Today we come to the final part of our Lenten series called ***RISE UP; Living into a Resurrected Life***. As most things this past year, Lent has also been a truly unique journey. Typically, the season of Lent is a time when we remember our mortality. When we admit that life is fragile. We open ourselves up rigorous honesty about the broken places and consider how we might live more fully. Lent is a somber, reflective season. This year, however, as we journeyed through the subdued, contemplative season, we kept our eyes on the far side of the cross, fixing our gaze instead on the far eastern horizon. We knew that something astonishing was coming with the dawn. Resurrection! The remarkable event that propels the Christian's hope. By God's grace, we not only will rise up from physical death, but also, we can live into a resurrected life here in this life as well. Resurrection comes all who accept God's gift of grace. By grace we find the courage to be utterly transparent and openly vulnerable to one another, we find strength in humility and seek reconciliation with God and one another. People who live into a resurrected life are quite naturally grateful people. I mean, who wouldn't be? To truly experience resurrection in to experience pure grace. The God of all grace gathers up all our flaws, suffering and self-destructive ways, and instead of retribution, offers us healing, forgiveness and resurrection into our truest selves. The ONLY response can be a life of gratitude. In fact, the Latin root word for gratitude is grace.

The psalms poetically proclaim this message. These emotional and personal writings span the entire spectrum of the human condition – from fear, complaint, and rage, to ecstasy, unfettered joy and thanksgiving. Today, we will hear parts of 9 *Psalms of Gratitude* and explore the astounding power of gratitude as a gateway that leads us into living the resurrected life.

Psalms of Gratitude

1. In God we make our boast all day long,
and we will praise your name forever. Psalm 44:8 NIV

2. I will extol the Lord at all times;
his praise will always be on my lips.
I will glory in my God;
let the afflicted hear and rejoice.
Glorify the Lord with me;
let us exalt God together. Psalm 34:1-3

3. Come, let us sing for joy to the Lord;
let us shout aloud to the Rock of our salvation.
Let us come before God with thanksgiving.
Psalm 95:1-2 NIV

4. Praise the Lord.
I will extol the Lord with all my heart
in the council of the upright and in the assembly.
Great are the works of the Lord;
they are pondered by all who delight in God. Psalm 111:1-2 NIV

5. It is good to praise the Lord
and make music to your name, O Most High, Psalm 92:1
6. The Lord is my strength and my shield;
my heart trusts in the God who helps me.
My heart leaps for joy,
and with my song I sing praise. Psalm 28
7. Praise the Lord.
Give thanks to the Lord, for God is good;
God's love endures forever. Psalm 106:
8. Enter God's gates with thanksgiving
and God's courts with praise;
give thanks and praise his name.
For the Lord is good and his love endures forever;
God's faithfulness continues through all generations. Psalm 100:4
9. Because of God's righteousness I will give thanks to the Lord;
I will sing the praises of the name of the Lord Most High. Psalm 7:17

SERMON

Maybe you can feel the power of those words affirming your soul already. No matter what the circumstances might be, the psalms bring the healing assurance of God's faithfulness and loving-kindness. Let us enter God's gates with gratitude and prayer...

Glorious God, you continually astound us with your endless grace. Because your love for us knows no bounds, we are filled and overflowing with gratitude. Guide us by your Holy Spirit this morning so that we might continue to live into a resurrected life and proclaim your goodness in all we do and speak. And now, may what I speak and the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to you our Rock and our Redeemer. -Amen

"It could be worse!" The elderly woman said, looking up at me from the hospital bed that had been her home now for months. I had been visiting her regularly as an intern hospital chaplain. I knew that her vision was about as good as what we see underwater. Her hearing though was surprisingly good. (That can actually be a curse in the hospital.) She could no longer walk. In fact, her once vigorous body had diminished into a frail, atrophied, skeleton with a heartbeat. She had no family and not once did anyone from outside come to visit her. "It could be worse?" We had this same frustrating conversation during every visit. The woman would take my hand and smile broadly through remarkably well-preserved teeth and say, "I'm so grateful today for the life I've had. God is so good to me."

I became increasingly frustrated with her insistent gratitude. It seemed to invalidate the reality of her pain. I know that people frequently tell ministers what they think we want to hear or say what faithful people *should*. It's the old, "fake it till you make it" routine. Her life story was one of loneliness, betrayal, abandonment and physical

impairment. But never did she once betray an ounce of bitterness, victimhood or self-pity. I was convinced that this cheery disposition was actually a granite wall of denial, constructed as an avoidance or deflection mechanism. What I really wanted was for her to trust me enough to be honest, to wail out to God and lament the suffering and loss she had endured. Instead what I got was, "It could be worse!" - "God is so good to me."

We all know that practicing gratitude has clinically proven, positive effects on people. In one study, participants were asked to write a few sentences each week, focusing on particular topics. One group wrote about things they were grateful for that had occurred during the week. A second group wrote about daily irritations or things that had displeased them, and the third wrote about events that had affected them (with no emphasis on them being positive or negative). After 10 weeks, those who wrote about gratitude were more optimistic and felt better about their lives. Surprisingly, they also exercised more and had fewer visits to physicians than those who focused on sources of aggravation.¹ My chronically invalid friend though, would not be exercising ever again and she saw more doctors in a day than a Miami medical conference in January. I was convinced that this was a case of oppressive denial. She had been somehow indoctrinated to be the submissive people pleaser. I became more and more irritated because I wanted the God she loved so much to liberate her from years of repression through a cathartic emptying of all the innocent suffering she surely must be carrying.

Eventually, I brought my frustration to my supervisor, a wise, experienced chaplain who's mystical orientation manifest like a real-life Yoda. He listened patiently, nodding every now and again. When I was done, he was silent for a long time and then gently asked, "Why do you think you know how she feels, or should feel? Is it possible that her extraordinary spirit of gratefulness is what brought her through it all? Is it possible that God is so present in her life that nothing else matters at all?" It was my turn to be silent. Yoda's question pierced me through the heart, deflating my overblown, presumptuous attempt to minister to this kindest of all women. Maybe the real truth was that she lived out these words written by the Psalmist:

I will extol the Lord at all times;
God's praise will always be on my lips.
I will glory in the Lord;
let the afflicted hear and rejoice.
Glorify the Lord with me;
let us exalt God's name together.²

Positive psychology is a relatively new methodology that has found great promise in the power of a gratitude to actually reverse the negative effects of mild depression, low self-esteem and a variety of other stress induced maladies. It is not about denying difficult emotions. It's more about accepting what is truly happening here and now. **Positive psychology** seeks to cultivate and appreciate what is good in your life. It is

¹ <https://www.health.harvard.edu/mind-and-mood/in-praise-of-gratitude>

² Psalm 34:1-3

amusing and wonderful to me how modern science so often affirms and enhances our understanding of our ancient sacred text.

Gratitude has great power for believers and non-believers alike. It is deeper than thankfulness, just as joy is deeper than happiness. Gratitude and joy dance together in the depths of every soul, for those who notice, no circumstance can diminish the dance. It is a state of being, a condition of our soul that can be cultivated and nurtured through practice. My elderly friend in the hospital had been working that practice like an Olympic athlete her entire life. From the ashes of tragedy and heartbreak, she had been resurrected a long time ago. I was not there when it happened but late one evening, she quietly slipped through death's door, and I am confident that this frail, emaciated, wisp of a woman, was the least surprised of anyone to then encounter her loving God waiting on the other side. I imagine they each smiled broadly and knowingly, and without a word, embraced.

As it turns out, the astounding miracle of resurrection is way more than just a reanimation of our physical life after our physical death. Sooner or later, God's love completely reverses all evil and liberates all oppressive bondage. Every cross that we bear, every burden we carry, every wrong direction we might go, every mistake we make - all of it - is not rejected or condemned by God. The shadowed places are put to use to subvert and neutralize even the worst evil imaginable. The horrific cruelty of the cross becomes a symbol of life, hope and grace. Resurrection is the act of God's transformative power. Swords are hammered into plowshares. A killing tree becomes a tree of life, an instrument of death becomes elegant jewelry and works of art. The death-dealing forces are not simply defeated, they are refashioned into life-giving energies. God wastes nothing!

To live into a resurrected life is to live a life of gratitude, knowing that you did nothing to deserve it or earn it. God's grace and resurrection promise is NOT reserved for those who successfully complete a 12-step self-improvement program or have the self-discipline to not cheat on their Lenten fast. God's grace knows nothing OUR goodness. It is simply given, and nothing can separate you from the Love of God. No matter what your crossfit trainers says, no matter what your boss or client says, no matter what your mother told you or what self-loathing words you tell yourself, God says, "You are my beloved, you are worthy, come let me resurrect that into life! Gratitude is the only response possible to God's gift of love.

A grateful life can begin this or any moment. As individuals and as a community, we can cultivate an attitude of gratitude. Gratefulness as a regular spiritual practice will produce GREAT FULLNESS. This is the magic bullet that can subvert our anxieties, and reverse the despair of hopelessness. Gratitude can even become a way to begin dismantling injustices. The grateful heart is a heart that is truly living into the resurrected life. SO, PEOPLE OF GOD, LET US

Enter God's gates with thanksgiving,
and God's courts with praise.



Sunday March 21, 2021
Rev. Robert W. Brown

Give thanks, and bless God's name.
For the Lord is good;
With a steadfast love that endures forever,
God is faithful to all generations.

AMEN.